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# **PRIMARY PUPIL'S PERSPECTIVES AND CREATIVE LEARNING**

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Bob Jeffrey

Research Fellow

The Open University

Walton Hall,

Milton Keynes,

England,

MK7 6AA

Direct Telephone 0044 208 692 2826

Email: [r.a.jeffrey@open.ac.uk](mailto:r.a.jeffrey@open.ac.uk)

## **PRIMARY PUPIL'S PERSPECTIVES AND CREATIVE LEARNING**

We see the basic features of creative teaching identified in earlier research - control, ownership, innovation and relevance {see (Woods 1990; Woods 1993; Woods 1994; Woods 1995; Woods and Jeffrey 1996) - as being similar to creative learning. We also feel that it is important for pupils' voices to be heard in matters concerning their own learning. Too often they are treated as ciphers, things 'to be done to' by the prescription of others, the efficacy of which is totally judged by others. Primary pupils are well able to articulate their views on new developments (Pollard, Thiessen, and Filer 1997). Nias (1989) says, 'teachers rely in the last resort for recognition upon their pupils, for no one else knows, or can know, how effectively they have taught'

The school in which we began this particular research served a mixed community in terms of class but the pupils were mainly white English aged 3-7. The second sample of children were aged 9-11 from an inner city school and of mainly Bangladeshi origin. We began, as with much ethnography, observing and recording written field notes, not just because this was epistemological appropriate but because we knew that this approach was to be essential part of researching the perspectives of children who are verbally immature. The observation and recording aspects of the research process was broken into two parts, focusing first on the individual's engagement with the learning environment and then on relevant social interactions between children and between children and teachers. Following this we engaged children in conversations in the classrooms and in small groups to discuss their learning experiences. We also used them as 'researchers' to analyse relevant photographs of teaching and learning situations. We have identified three 'lenses' that can be used by researchers to gain children's perspectives, which at the same time provide evidence of creative learning. The three lenses are individual interpretations, social interactions and reflective evaluations.

### **INDIVIDUAL INTERPRETATIONS**

Children interpret and react to their experiences expressively, particularly where they are individually reacting to an experience. These expressions can be seen in their bodily reactions, their imaginative links and their experiential connections.

## *Corporeal Reactions*

It is argued that ‘ teachers bodies have been an absent presence’ in the research literature on the teacher self. According to Synott (in Sparkes 1999) the body is ‘ the prime symbol of the self, and the prime determinant of the self’. Young children experiment with their bodies and express themselves with their bodies. At the First school the curriculum involved a great deal of experiential learning:

During the more 'active engagements' there were lots of shared smiles and laughter. They played with expressions as they: laughed at themselves and the situation; expressed amazement; made facial and verbal connections with someone else; screwed up their faces with contorted smiles as they experienced strange noises like bagpipes and tactile encounters while making porridge.

However, they did not overdo the excitement, they acted calmly with interest. {Field Note Memo}

Exterior territories or surfaces of the body symbolize the self (Sparkes 1999). Physical engagements, if considered relevant to the experience, can be the focus of much deliberation by children:

The head teacher ensured that all the children in the school were part of the whole experience of listening to the bell ringers. At the end of the performance every child walked down the line of ringers and exchanged hugs and kisses with each of nine ringers. The children didn't attempt to play or fiddle with the bells lying on the table as they passed. Instead they concentrated on the next physical encounter, the next caress, with their faces exhibiting anticipation, excitement, but mixed with nervousness. They experimented with their approach, first standing back, then leading and making decisions as to when to move on. As the next ringer finished with the person in front they looked up wondered what action to take, what kind of embrace they might receive and how long they should linger in a cuddle. The staff including the head joined in this routine. {Field Note Memo}

Sequential physical activities can underpin narrative development.

A group of Yr. 1 children are washing, carding and combing natural wool outside the classroom. They were trying to establish what was a fair test using four different washing methods....The children enjoyed the experience, experimenting with the water and they used the opportunity to play with the bubbles. ‘Unrelated’ play acts as a ‘learning connection’ for the whole process ‘We took the wool from a sheep, washed it, carded it and we are making it into a rope, using different

soaps to make it smell nice'. They may not have quite understood the development of a fair test but they used their engagement to perfect the sequence of the general 'story'. {Field Note Memo}

Writing can be seen as a creative physical activity for young children. Samantha spent over an hour, writing about the model of a Tudor house she and her family had constructed to be burnt as a celebration of the Fire of London at school. She is five years old but refuses to read her story to me until she has finished it. She was not dependent on an emotional relationship with an adult to encourage her engagement but she had taken control and ownership of the activity.

In the olden days people were very silly. They threw their rubbish on to the street. There was a disease going round carried by rats and they passed it on to people. A few weeks later a fire broke out. It was fierce. A man was sleeping and he was woken by a servant who told him that there was a fire. He said something rude. When he woke up the next morning everything was burnt up.

{Hannah}

At the actual burning of their model houses in the school grounds the children sat on 'Arthur's seat' (see Woods 1995) for more details of the use of school grounds at this school}, singing 'London's Burning'. They moved around smiling as a fierce wind cut into their ruddy cheeks and they jumped up and down thoroughly engaged'. (Field Note Memo)

Yr. 5 children became immersed in the physical mixing and tasting of their own personal yoghurt recipe during a design and technology project:

'At first it was too light so I added chocolate and it became darker and tasted better'. 'Mine tastes very nice but I do not think anyone will buy it because it doesn't look very nice'. 'The taste of the colour was OK but it did not smell very nice. I was unsure how to change the smell'. 'The biscuits make it a crunchy texture'. 'I mixed and mixed and got carried away but it still tasted good'. They begin to make up stories about their yoghurt making. {Field Note Memo}

All of our features of creative teaching and learning - control, ownership, relevance, and innovation - are expressed in this exercise and the corporeal work is enhanced by physical tasting.

Observation of these physical engagements gives some insight into what enthuses, excites, commands attention, stimulates and preoccupies children in creative teaching and learning sessions. Yr. 6 children on a school journey away from their school went into the woods to construct life size shelters.

They collected material from within the wood; calling out to each other in the vernacular; lifting and dropping, explaining the process of handling large wooden branches; making walking sticks; gingerly filling up the gaps with leaves and grass; wandering off further and further away from the model while others stayed close carefully layering branches as close as possible. One boy emerged from the trees with a small handful of leaves and mud; others kicked a pile together with their boots. They balanced on unsteady fallen trees testing the resilience and one pupil delicately touched a thorn on a winter twig. One swung from a branch and others balanced on branches and logs on the ground as they rolled them along. They pushed and shoved long Cherry branches into the apex of the shelter and layered others on top. Muddy fingers and hands are held away from their bodies and logs three times their height are carried aloft. As more and more leaf mould was needed they marched backwards and forwards in and out of the woods in twos and threes shouting excitedly. Screams came from a close thicket as someone leapt out and surprised a group. They all wore orange anoraks and seemed like a tribe appearing and disappearing behind thick elderberry bushes. One raced with another back towards the shelter with their wall covering of leaf mold, spilling it everywhere. {Field Note Memo}

These are observed physical expressions and at the same time they reflect their individual and collective perspectives as learner and learners together in the way they create their learning practices.

### ***Experiential Connections***

Perspectives are imbued with experience. Connections with home are often made both overtly and covertly as Hannah, aged 4, showed when she analysed some photographs of children engaging in nursery activities.

She's thinking about magic. She's thinking she might throw all the sand out. I've got a big sandpit at home and I like digging it up...I liked dressing up Sindy and the teddy bear on the computer.

Following a child's narrative direction avoids the child experiencing feelings of rejection and at the same time a teacher is seen to 'model' curiosity (Paley 1986). The child's world is full of stories and narratives and where these are invoked they should be followed for a while, following their experiential connections with the classroom learning situation.

It is interesting being with the sheep because you can feel the warm wool and texture, and it is soft like my hair. It is interesting feeling things. {Michelle}

In documenting adult perspectives the quality of the analysis is enriched by encouraging life histories (Goodson 1991). A yr. 1 child's appreciation of other children's work may well have been heightened because of her familial connections.

They are drawing pictures of the army band on the playground floor with chalks. It was exciting because a friend of my dad's was in the band. I knew some of the music because it had been put on in my dad's concert. {Linda Yr.1}

Relevance and ownership are contained in experiential perspectives. Young children's physical engagement coupled with their own experiences can lead to reflective observations:

I liked it when I made the Christmas pudding. I made a wish for a bunk bed to come early and it came true. When I was sitting in a circle playing with my shirt I thought of Ariel the Mermaid with hair as red as this. I'm a real fan of Ariel. I like her songs and the toys she gives out. I liked chopping up the dates because I got to eat the prunes and the using the pips to grow a plum tree. The worst thing about school is having *to go* to school and having *to leave* school. That is the worst thing about school. I liked helping plant trees and to sow the grass. I planted the yew tree and the apple tree for the millennium. {Matthew Yr.2}

Stories about their own lives, and school experiences rooted in events and characters whether factual or fictionalized, serves to place the child at the centre of the engagement and allow her to construct the meanings and interpretations. 'Translating experience into a story is a fundamentally *shaping* activity,' (Laing 1999 p.5)

### ***Imaginative Links***

An alternative source of individual connection with learning is an engagement with imagination. Using imagination is often to be seen in their analogies or mnemonics to secure the learning experience. These are each child's unique perspectives similar to a painter or sculptor using their imagination. In this sense this is their perspective illuminated and described metaphorically. One child's perspective relating to an experience of harp playing was developed imaginatively.

I felt the vibrations by touching the harp while he played it. I liked the music. I imagined that I was in a field riding a horse. I then jumped off the horse into space. I jumped on to a planet and then I jumped on to star. I then went into a spaceship and there was nothing in it. It was the world and I was falling down on to it, back on to my horse. (David)

While gathering up daffodils to be planted some children defined them in their own terms as 'double deckers' - a reference to hamburgers - and 'twins' The learning of the names of some three-dimensional shapes and their properties in a maths session was redirected from assimilation to the imaginative. The Yr. 2 children described the shapes in conversation with each other as: 'eyeballs, a hat, a clucking hen, a helmet, a salamander and a telescope'. These are imaginative perspectives brought to the learning process. Affirmation of these perspectives not only enhances the children's self-esteem for they are 'connotations' (Barthes and Heath 1984) that aid the learning process. They are also ways in which the children gain control and ownership over that knowledge.

A group of children were exploring the features of light in science and in particular using torches to learn about electric power in batteries but they took control of the situation and developed their own creative learning activity.

Let me look in your mouth.

Open your mouth, open your mouth. You're taking something.

I'm Mr. lighthouse. Hello Mister lighthouse. [singing]

The light has gone out 'Oh my head has broken off, oh my head has broken off' [quiet screaming].

I'm a big car coming round the corner. [La La La, screeching noise]

I'll have a race with you on the motorway Mr. White car.

Now we're racing down the motorway 5 4 3 2 1 crash [accompanying noises]

Who wants an injection?

Just pretend you're the police. [Accompanying noises] got you.

You can't see me. I have turned off my lights.

Shall I tell you what you have got on your nose, a big red spot. [laughter]

Let me have a look up your nose with my torch. You've got a big bone up there.

Let us look in your ear. {Field Note Memo}

There is a danger of ignoring these comments as frivolous and irrelevant but it might well be important to encourage imaginative links to increase the relevance of the knowledge to be learned.

Sue asked the children to imagine what it would be like if their muscles grew faster than their bones and vice-versa.

I'd be all floppy if my bones didn't grow.

My skin would be hanging down off the end of my fingers.



My nose would be dangling down there.

My earrings will be touching the floor.

If my bones grew when my body didn't I would be all skinny.

I would have extra lumps all-over me.

My bones would be stretching my body so I would be very thin.

I'd be like a skinny soldier and bones would be sticking out of my skin.

My brain would be getting squashed. {Field Note Memo}

Creative learning enables children to 'take over' the subject matter and to 'take it in'. This could be seen as the teacher 'scaffolding' learning, (Bruner 1986), if she encouraged it. These stories, dramas, role-play and narratives contain the languages and discourses of children's cultures. Perspectives are not just the reflective, standing back analysis of experience and observation but include the ways in which respondents interpret and define their experiences.

Focusing on corporeal connections, experiential connections and imaginative links allows us to perceive the ways in which children react to school curriculum and pedagogies and how they interpret them – their perspectives. They bring their perspectives, create perspectives, and where this is modelled, encouraged and valued by adults, they construct creative learning.

## **SOCIAL INTERACTIONS**

Social constructivist theories of learning, (Bruner 1986; Pollard and with Filer 1996; Pollard 1985) emphasize the importance of social interaction for learning and our research has so far identified two particular areas where children develop their creative learning - collaboration or leadership initiatives and contributions to teaching and learning situations.

### ***Collaborative or leadership initiatives***

In these situations, individual children take the lead and organize someone else or a group, relying on their experience or their imagination as a rationale. I asked some Yr. 2 children to give me some stories about situations in which their innovative ideas had been taken up by their family or by the class.

Owen tells me about going shopping on Mother's Day and how he suggested to his father that they buy a Mother's Day card and hide it in a newspaper on the way home. Another told me how they hid some chocolates in a Mothercare bag and then hid them in a lockable cupboard at home.

Another explained how she had suggested that they go to Center Parks for their holiday and the family had agreed. (Field Note Memo)

From children's perspectives, leadership is not just related to power but to developing their creativity. The Yr. 6 children's evaluation of the construction of the life size shelter reflected a collaborative discourse developed by the teachers during the session concerning 'team work', but it also sounded like a creative learning experience for they 'felt' control and ownership of the process

It was good building the shelter because we were in a team and sharing ideas. It is good to know how to work as a team, helping each other. If you forget something the other people in your team will help you. Whereas when we were doing our models each individual concentrated on their own and got less help. In our team we had to talk together and get ideas from each other. You have to know who was going to do each job. We shared the jobs out in our team.

Observing and recording the taking of the role of leader is a vital element in showing how respondents act in the world they experience and therefore is therefore their perspective of it in terms of the self (Jeffrey 1999; Woods 1996).

Sophie (Yr. 2) asks another child if she can use her hands to help with doubling numbers and the pair of them use this strategy to complete the task. Some new reception children have arrived in Judy's class and she asks the indigenous group to dramatize one of their favourite stories. So an 'audience' is created and the children improvise the characters' behaviours imaginatively from the story as it is read. Leading, demonstrating and teaching is an important part of the taking control and ownership and results in innovatory initiatives.

Sue asks her mixed 5-7 year old children how they would fill up an alien's empty brain and the children not only use their imagination but they confronted each other in discussion.

I would do it in a laboratory.

I would do it by telling.

You can't. Because it hasn't got anything in its brain to think with.

He wouldn't be able to remember anything.

You could make him go to sleep and then open his head a little to put the right information on his brain.

### ***Contributions to the teaching and learning situation***

Children bring their perspectives to the social context of the teaching and learning situation by re-interpreting, in their own terms, teacher's assertions, observations, questions and instructions. They often do this quite spontaneously. When Sue and Carol started a discussion about boys having babies a Yr.1 boy affirmed the suggestion by telling them that 'I like babies'. They construct their own contributions to the situation, whether heard or not

One of the teacher says, 'all the pots from all the children are in the kiln'. A Yr. 1 child says

'except for the juniors'. (Field Note Memo)

Another reception child adds to the teacher's instructions about planting daffodils, 'not upside down like this'.

Children are expected to answer questions and complete tasks but in a creative teaching climate they find it easier to offer creative strategies:

Jude asks the Yr. 2 group how many they need to get from 75 to 100. She then commends a girl who offers a solution as to how to remember the number arrived at [add on or take off the five, then count in tens and then remember to add on or take away the 5].

Sue asks her class 'how they learn' and the answers not only contribute to knowledge but the contributory climate sets a precedence for them to share their knowledge.

I listen and you teach us.

You need to use your ears to listen, your nose to smell and your eyes to see.

You need to listen most of the time and to be quiet.

It is like you have dots in your brain and they are all joined up.

You think about it.

Your brain is telling you how to use your eyes.

The college tells you what to tell us and you tell us and we get the answer.

Children's identities are constituted not only by their relationships to others, but in terms of what they 'know' and to the extent to which this knowledge, their observations and their perspectives are accepted and discussed in social contexts.

During the discussion about how babies learn, with Yr. 1 and 2 children the following question came out of the blue and was developed by the others.

‘This question is a hard one because how did the first person in the world know all the things about the world’. ‘God taught them’ ‘But he was a little baby’. ‘How did the world get made?’ ‘How did the first person get made’. ‘How did the whole universe gets made’. ‘How did life start to grow?’

There are those supporters of child centred education who have advocated a curriculum that begins with children’s questions or beginning the investigation of a specific subject by starting with children’s questions (Blyth 1984) and recording more questions as the investigation develops. The rejection, marginalization or silencing of their ‘knowledge’ is, in effect, a rejection of the child’s self-identity. This action may not cause the disintegration of the self, for identity survival is a powerful motivation (Giddens 1991; Jeffrey 1999) but it may alienate the child from the learning environment or cause them to become dependent on satisfying teacher expectations. The social world of children's learning can be seen as a ‘recursive cycle through which identity, learning challenges, learning contexts and learning outcomes feed into and condition each other’ (Pollard and with Filer 1996 p.97-98)

## **REFLECTIVE EVALUATION**

Children, even those in early years education, are able to reflect upon situations, events and experiences. They have considerable knowledge of a variety of situations and experiences and they are able to use these within and between various discourses where we all construct our realities (Davies and Harre 1994). Their reflections and evaluations have been split between learning situations and those relevant to tests and assessments.

### ***Learning Situations***

They are able to impute a form of ‘engaged disinterestedness’ Paulin (in Marshall 2001) and reflect upon their learning experiences as this Yr. 2 pupil shows.

The Irish famine play was exciting because we didn't know who was going to be chosen to take part in the play. I was chosen. I had to be one of those children that died. That was a sad part. It was a bit scary being asked to dance around in front of the whole school but I don't mind being scared a little. You just do it. We are all children and if you make a mistake it doesn't matter. I learnt from this story that you have got to share. The rich people were not giving the poor people enough land to grow their food and in the end when the potatoes went bad and they starved. There was so much sadness going round and I couldn't understand why some people were so cruel

making the people get worse and worse until they died. It was very very very sad when the teachers were pretending to cry about their dead children. I really didn't like it when people started dying. It was like it was really happening.

Young children are also aware of feelings and able to articulate the meaningfulness of emotional situations as this Yr. 2 child did when looking at a photograph of a child standing on a table in front of the class;

Owen is standing on the table with some writing in his hand. The teachers could be saying 'Well done Owen' and giving him a clap because he has done a 'star' piece of work. Owen would be thinking 'wow I have made the teachers very pleased'. He likes standing on the table because we were not allowed to do it normally. It is a treat. He feels happy and confident. This will help him with his writing because it will make him listen more and will give him more confidence. I've never really felt like that.

The children raised a number of observations and questions relating to teaching and learning, in particular those issues relating to control:

In this picture a child is using the computer. He is interested in what he is doing. Computers tell you things and it can teach you things. It is also enjoyable learning how to use the keyboard. Some computer programmes are enjoyable because you can make things on them and play around with it. You get control of it because the computer can't do it all its own. You are controlling it like you would control a robot. {Sarah Yr.1}

The Yr 5 and 6 children also raised a number of observations and questions relating to teaching and learning. A significant amount of time is now spent listening to teachers in whole class situations (Galton et al. 1999) and the pupils have some relevant albeit differentiated reactions and observations to make about the effectiveness of this approach.

You can generate ideas and ask questions on the carpet but if you try things out for yourself then you can see how they are done and where the mistakes are. If your teacher is doing it you don't learn that way.

I think we should spend 20 minutes on the carpet and 40 minutes doing.

I think we should spend most of the time on the tables working. I prefer just to go and get on with it without being interrupted because that is so frustrating. You just want to do the thinking and get on with it.

I think I would prefer to do little bit on the carpet then have a little bit of doing and then come back to the carpet so that I remember each part easily.

They were also able to build ideal models, in this case, of a teacher.

I would give them stickers rather than telling them off and sending them to the office to encourage them to work.

I would be like a mum to them. I would not shout or scream at them. I would be kind. If they were naughty I would make them sit on their own for a little while.

I would let them play games and give them 'privilege time'. I would let them talk about their feelings and let them stay in.

I would help them by giving them words to make a story and I would put all the numbers on the wall to help them. I would make the learning interesting. (Yr. 2 children)

Reflections based upon experience and reflection are also significant for personal development:

The school journey was a challenge. It was a big step for us, like leaving a family and we were brave to do it. It taught us how to do it when we have to leave home. It taught us braveness.

### ***Testing and Assessment Situations***

When it came to tests children used their experience to make recommendations

Researcher: How would you have changed the organization of the tests?

Parvin: You should have one or two people to help us understand questions.

Researcher: Would you have allowed more time to do them?

Shereena: I would give extra marks for those who did it quickly but allow lots of time for all of us.

Parvin: The problem with that is that it might encourage some of us to rush it.

Researcher: What should happen if a child looked as though they were struggling?

Bodrun: A teacher should keep an eye on them and encourage them to move on to the next question.

They fully understood the test process:

Researcher: How do you get a better level?

Mehedi: By putting sentences together that make sense. Making sure the examiner can understand what you are writing. You should explain it properly on a paper.

Masun: You have to revise very hard.

Researcher: How do you revise?

Mehedi: You go home and you look at the book and then you close it and you try to remember it.

Nazma: Also you can remember what you have been taught. You have to remember simple sentences. When you first see a SATs paper you may be nervous and forget everything. If you remember to be confident and think about the facts you have been taught it will help you.

Shazia : Take all the books home and look at each one for 10 minutes.

Evaluations of classroom climates and learning issues can lead to broader critical perspectives concerning issues relating to organizations in society and power relations.

Lutfu: The thing that frightens me is that you do not know what you're going to get and I might not be able to understand it or do it. If that happens I will get lower marks than other people. Then I will feel I have let myself and everyone else down. It means that other people will have understood something and it feels like I have done something wrong if I get lower marks. I would be letting the school down.

Researcher: How would your mark be letting the school down?

The teachers are supporting us in our work and if we get lower marks than other schools we would feel embarrassed.

Researcher: Why does it matter if other schools get better marks?

Babul: Because it is hard for the teachers to teach us such a lot and they spend a lot of time doing it. And if we don't even get Level Four for our stories it looks like those

teachers have not worked hard enough. It would have let them down because they have worked so hard trying to get us to get good marks.

Researcher: Why does it matter to the teachers if you get good marks?

Lutfa: It makes them happy that they have taught us well.

Babul: They will be proud of us.

Lutfa: And they will be proud of themselves because they taught us.

Kumol: The teachers in this school work very hard with children especially when they come straight from Bangladesh. They know what to do to help them and teaching them how to read.

They 'speak the discourse' (Ball 1994) and to that extent, like any adult, they are able to engage in discussion and analysis.

Pupils are quite capable of handling two or more discourses. They are sensitive not only to the discourse but also to the effects of it upon the people within it, as these comments concerning an inspection of the school indicate. 'I think the teachers were nervous. They seemed to be everywhere. I think they were worrying about how their class was going to be. I think our teacher was nervous about our class. You could tell by the look on her face' {Yr. 5}.

Judgements are not just personal but involve moral and social analysis of others' roles,

I would not like to be in inspector because I would not like to have to tell the truth about children to other people. They have to tell the truth. If someone did something really wrong I would have to tell the teacher. I would be breaking all their fun and the teacher might punish them. I do not like telling the teachers what bad things they had done because I would forgive them and say, 'they are only children'.

## CONCLUSION

Researching pupil perspectives through the individual engagements, social relations and reflective evaluation is productive in that we are able to extend our range of understanding as to how children engage with their learning environment. Researching pupil perspectives in creative climates gives us some indication of not only the success of these practices but it also gives us an opportunity to ascertain how far children are able to bring their creative learning to the educational context. It has become clear from this



research that there are many facets of pupil engagement, which assist creative learning, that may be overlooked by teachers. We suggest the following as possible starting points:

- ◆ Encouraging pupils to explain innovative procedures.
- ◆ Encouraging pupils to produce unique objects/solutions/presentations.
- ◆ Encouraging pupil experimentation.
- ◆ Encouraging pupil questions concerning either facts/knowledge or process?
- ◆ Encouraging pupil summaries of an experience?
- ◆ Encouraging pupil use of metaphor.
- ◆ Encouraging pupils to make contributions or assist with a curriculum or pedagogic process/problem.

A broader benefit of researching pupil perspectives and incorporating them into school curriculum programmes is that the definition of education becomes expanded to a conceptualization that leans more heavily towards ‘learning communities’ (Woods 1998). We would regard both creative teaching and creative learning being imbued with these values.

## GOLASSARY

Primary pupils – aged 3 to 11.

Nursery – pupils aged 3-5

Reception pupils – aged 4-5

Yr.1 = ages 5-6, Yr. 2 = 6-7, Yr. 5 = 9-10, Yr. 6 = 10-11

SATs = Standard Assessment Tests = National Tests

First School – Pupils aged 3-7

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